

# “Teaching is a learning experience”: Exploring Faculty Engagement with Low-Income Adult Learners in a College-Community Partnership Program

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## **Abstract**

This article examines interview data with faculty teaching in a college-community partnership program for low-income adult students in an urban setting. The purpose of the study was to explore faculty understandings of the diverse learning needs of their students and the perceptions they have of the efficacy of their teaching practices regarding course design and delivery. Findings highlight the central dynamic of teaching as a negotiated relationship and process of mutual learning between faculty and students, and the means by which faculty work to create engaging and empowering classroom environments. Our research is relevant to educators interested in designing and delivering courses from a social justice perspective in order to encourage adults from low-income communities to pursue a post-secondary pathway.

*Keywords:* post-secondary access, adult learners, low-income student engagement, social justice education

## **Résumé**

Le présent article examine des données d'entrevues réalisées avec le corps professoral dans le cadre d'un programme de partenariat collège-communauté à l'intention d'étudiants adultes à faible revenu en milieu urbain. L'étude avait pour but d'explorer la façon dont le corps professoral comprend les divers besoins en apprentissage de ses étudiants et la façon dont il perçoit l'efficacité de ses pratiques d'enseignement en ce qui a trait à la conception et à l'offre des cours. Les résultats font ressortir la dynamique centrale de l'enseignement en tant que relation négociée et comme processus d'apprentissage mutuel entre le corps professoral et les étudiants, et les moyens par lesquels le corps professoral s'emploie à créer des environnements de salle de classe captivants et stimulants. Notre recherche s'avère pertinente pour les éducateurs qui souhaitent concevoir et offrir des cours dans une perspective de justice sociale afin d'encourager les adultes issus des communautés à faible revenu à poursuivre des études postsecondaires.

*Mots-clés :* accès aux études postsecondaires, apprenants adultes, faible revenu, engagement des étudiants, éducation à la justice sociale

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## Introduction

Low-income adult learners in Canadian communities face a wide range of financial and non-financial barriers regarding accessibility to a post-secondary education. Such barriers include socio-economic challenges, unemployment, low rates of educational attainment, feelings of social exclusion, immigrant status, and factors related to ethnic or racial identity (Abada et al., 2009; Lange et al., 2015; McMullen, 2011; Mueller, 2008; Prins & Schafft, 2009). In addition to financial assistance, initiatives designed to increase the accessibility of a post-secondary education for such populations typically include credit-based transition courses and the provision of various forms of wrap-around support such as academic upgrading services, academic counselling, and the provision of child-care (Bowering et al., 2017; Childs et al., 2017; Michalski et al., 2017). Such initiatives work to ameliorate the diverse interplay of the situational (financial constraints or family/childcare responsibilities), institutional (the cost and accessibility of a post-secondary education), and dispositional (a lack of confidence in one's academic abilities) barriers that adult learners from low-income communities face (Cross, 1981; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Flynn et al., 2011; Philibert et al., 2008; Pinsent-Johnson et al., 2013). Despite these initiatives, adults from low-income communities remain both underrepresented and underserved in higher education (Frempong et al., 2012; Lange et al., 2015; Pollock, 2012).

A central contention of this article is that post-secondary accessibility initiatives need to be designed and delivered from a social justice perspective in order to engage more effectively with the specific needs of low-income individuals. In the article, we draw upon interview data with 11 college faculty teaching in a college-community partnership program for low-income adult learners in an urban setting in Ontario. Faculty deliver tuition-free for-credit courses in neighbourhood-based settings called learning hubs designed to facilitate the progress of students to a further post-secondary program of study. The purpose of the article is to explore faculty perceptions of the efficacy of their teaching practices regarding course design and delivery. Although a growing body of literature has emerged exploring the adoption of a social justice approach to education, there is currently a lack of research addressing the question of how faculty work to meet the needs of low-income adult learners when it comes to encouraging their engagement with higher education. Our analysis addresses this research gap by exploring faculty

understandings of the needs of their students, the teaching practices they employ in the classroom in order to engage and empower students, and how they work to encourage students to pursue a post-secondary pathway.

## **Literature Review**

A growing body of scholarship has emerged encouraging the adoption of a social justice approach to education (Allan, 2003; Gardner & Toope, 2011; Gorski, 2013; Hackman, 2005; hooks, 1994; Kaur, 2012; Keddle, 2012; Lalas & Valle, 2007; Lingard & Mills, 2007; McInerney, 2009; Pollock, 2012). Definitions of what constitutes a social justice approach to education vary widely, ranging from a commitment to treating students equally to rebuilding the fundamental tenets of the teaching and learning process (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014, p. 7). Bell (1997) sees the adoption of a social justice approach as both a goal and a process: “The process for attaining the goal of social justice...should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change” (p. 4). Such views position the classroom as the location of possibility and advocacy in challenging the barriers that students from marginalized communities face (Keddle, 2012, p. 263). In essence, the importance of adopting a social justice approach to education is not only because of the proven economic benefits of education to individuals (Jones & Field, 2013; Michalski, 2017), but also the non-economic benefits that education brings, such as a greater sense of social inclusion, personal growth and professional development, and community-building (Riele, 2006).

In this article, we utilize a social justice approach to education that draws upon the work of Freire (1990, 2005), Shor and Freire (1987), and Zyngier (2007, 2011) in recognizing dialogue and compassion as central to inclusionary forms of teaching and learner engagement (Lalas & Valle, 2007). Central to the application of a dialogical lens to teaching is that students are encouraged to take an active role in their education, with engaged faculty members working to create and sustain democratic, empowering classroom environments (Hackman, 2005; Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014). In doing so, instructors draw upon their experience and knowledge of post-secondary resources in order to bolster the agency of students wishing to pursue a post-secondary pathway. In particular,

a Freirean approach recognizes the crucial role and influence of the teaching process in fostering learner self-discovery and empowerment, as well as the practical importance of the classroom setting as the site of transformative engagement and mutual learning between teachers and students (Shor & Freire, 1987). We understand self-discovery in this context as referring to faculty guiding students in identifying their tacit knowledge, talents, passions, and strengths, whereas empowerment refers to nurturing the knowledge, skills, and confidence required to apply those passions and strengths in a way that supports students' academic goals.

The utilization of a social justice approach to education presents a two-fold challenge for course design and course delivery. First, engaging with the diverse and specific needs of students calls for a rethinking of pedagogical approach. As McInerney (2009) notes, the dominance of regimented, inflexible, and vocationally-driven course design can result in a "pedagogy of poverty" (p. 25) that fails to engage with the lived experience of individuals from marginalized groups. The necessity of challenging this is stressed by Florian and Rouse (2009), who argue that inflexible pedagogies (e.g., rigid/outdated curricula, inappropriate forms of assessment, or a lack of sensitivity to students' life circumstances) act as barriers to students' progress. Countering this, Zyngier (2011) evokes the notion of "pedagogical reciprocity" (p. 226) in describing the relationship between faculty and students as a process of mutual learning. Seeking to empower students, faculty work with students to encourage connection (linking course content to what students know), ownership (encouraging students to see themselves and their life-worlds in their work), responding (e.g., to lived experience), and empowerment (viewing students as having the capacity to become active participants in their learning). Cultivating a sensitivity to such reciprocity evokes what Allan (2003) terms "productive pedagogies" (p. 175); that is, the fostering of an inclusive classroom environment that demonstrates a sense of connectedness to students' identities and the differences between and among them (hooks, 1994; Freire, 2005).

A second challenge lies with the practical implementation of adopting a social justice approach in terms of course delivery. This necessitates flexibility in terms of curriculum materials, small class sizes, variable pacing of instruction and assignment expectations, more one-on-one attention between student and teacher and, crucially, sensitivity to students' life circumstances (Lange et al., 2015). Such practical considerations are necessary when seeking to challenge the diversity of the barriers that adult learners face

(Cross, 1981; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). As Willans and Seary (2008) note, “Many [adult learners] have been hindered by both their past and present educational, social or cultural circumstances and most doubt their ability to succeed in higher education” (p. 438). In such circumstances, the classroom becomes a focal point for students as they (re) negotiate their relationship to learning and the conceptualizations they have of themselves as students.

Contextualizing both these challenges are institutional approaches that often serve to perpetuate negative stereotypes regarding individuals from low-income communities, depicting them as deficient and lacking the skills necessary for post-secondary success (Milner, 2008). Such negative stereotyping risks perpetuating what Gorski (2012) terms the “deficit ideology” (p. 313) that often influences policy approaches designed to improve the participation rate of underrepresented groups in post-secondary learning contexts. In effect, such deficit-style approaches can compound the marginalization of students by minimizing the potential of their individual and collective agency (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011). All too often, the result is that post-secondary institutions pay insufficient attention to the interplay of the structural, systemic, and institutional barriers that affect students’ learning experiences (McLean, 2016; Prins & Schafft, 2009). In challenging this, a social justice approach to education counters the deficit model by positioning students as active, willing, and positive participants in their education (Zyngier, 2011). Drawing upon Fraser’s (2000) distributive understanding of justice as it pertains to education, Keddie (2012) calls for the promotion of socially and culturally inclusive classrooms that connect with the “funds of knowledge” (p. 267) that students possess. Citing the benefits for students who are able to maintain a strong sense of personal identity and connection to their community, Lalas and Valle (2007) define such “funds of knowledge” as the “interconnections and networks” (p. 77) of students’ identities, schools, families, and neighbourhoods.

In essence, adopting a social justice approach to education necessitates careful consideration of how teaching faculty work to engage with the specific needs of learners through course design and the teaching practices they employ in the classroom. Central to achieving this is the faculty–student relationship that lies at the heart of the classroom experience, a relationship crucial to encouraging student engagement with post-secondary education.

## Study Overview

Our study is based on a college-community partnership program in an urban setting that delivers tuition-free and for-credit college courses through two neighbourhood-based classrooms in the community called *learning hubs*. The first learning hub was launched in 2015 in a former inner-city school that has been repurposed by local resident groups as a community centre. Launched in 2016, the second learning hub is situated in the city's central library location. The primary purpose of the program is to provide educational opportunities that encourage low-income residents to pursue a further course of post-secondary study, with the neighbourhood setting of the classrooms designed to foster a comfortable and informal learning environment. Drawn from programs of study offered by the college, courses typically run for 10 weeks and average 14 students per course.

Courses delivered at the first learning hub location include Family Dynamics, Health Safety and Nutrition, College 101, Introduction to Child and Youth Care, Analyzing Video Games, and Introduction to Construction. Courses delivered at the second location include College 101, Popular Culture, and Digital Photojournalism. Notwithstanding the diversity of course subject matter, all courses are delivered at an introductory level and focus on providing students with an initial taste of the post-secondary experience. Courses typically include a range of written and reflection-based assignments aimed at nurturing students' academic and critical thinking skills. As much as possible, course content engages with topics and issues relevant and applicable to the community. Course credits (up to a maximum of two) can be used toward a program of study in one of the college's certificate or diploma programs. Students who subsequently apply to a program of study at the college typically do so through a pathway designated for mature students. Applicants who are able to demonstrate through testing that they have completed specific Grade 12 courses (or who have completed an equivalent) can go directly into their chosen program of study. Applicants who fail to demonstrate the required grade levels have the option of enrolling in tuition-free academic upgrading (AU) or pursuing a General Education Development (GED) certificate. The GED test allows applicants to earn an Ontario High School Equivalency Certificate, which is equivalent to an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).

The development of the learning hub model, including course design and delivery format, was the result of a two-year outreach and engagement process by the college's



community access and engagement team. This included regular attendance at the monthly meetings of residents' groups, attendance at community events, consultations with neighbourhood social service providers, and open table events at neighbourhood locations such as cafés and libraries. Methodologically, we understand such community engagement to be what Bennet and Bennet (2007) term "collaborative entanglement," a dialogic process that remains responsive to the "intentional collision and interplay" (p. 18) of the knowledge and perspectives of all those involved. By bringing the college classroom to the community, the learning hub model ultimately aims to mitigate some of the institutional barriers that students may face regarding the cost and accessibility of a college education.

## **Methods: Research Design and Interview Procedure**

The research study followed a qualitative research framework, using semi-structured interviews. From late 2017 to early 2018, we conducted interviews with 11 college faculty who have taught in the learning hub initiative. We selected faculty who have taught at least two courses at either of the hub locations. Reflecting the diversity of the types of courses delivered through the hub locations, the disciplinary backgrounds of faculty included specializations in early childhood education, social work, communications, digital media, education, business, literature, computer technology, and construction. Although ethical commitments toward participant confidentiality preclude a more detailed description, instructors had an average of 15 years of teaching experience in their respective fields of expertise, with several having lengthy professional careers, also in their field. All had some experience of working with marginalized populations, with several having specific expertise in terms of their knowledge of adult learning theory, accessibility, and social justice education. Composed of eight women and three men, the final sample represents approximately 50% of faculty who have taught in the learning hub initiative.

Following course completion, faculty were contacted with an interview request by email, with interviews subsequently taking place at either one of the hub locations, or at the main college campus. Our review of the literature on social justice-centred education guided us in developing semi-structured interview questions focused on the teaching practices and philosophies of faculty, the challenges they encountered when working with

individuals from marginalized communities, and how they worked to engage and empower students with course content. The same list of questions was posed to each interviewee, with the open-ended nature of the interview process helping to facilitate an open and candid conversational tone (Adams, 2015). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. All interviews, contact protocols, and consent forms received ethical clearance before the commencement of the research. Ranging in length from 45 to 70 minutes, interviews were conducted by two members of the research team, neither of whom were participating faculty nor involved in the design or running of the initiative.

Interview transcripts were analyzed by the research team using thematic analysis, a method used to identify, analyze, and discuss patterns and themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Open to being utilized across a range of epistemological and theoretical perspectives, thematic analysis involves an interpretative process of meaning-making in which key themes and sub-themes are identified and categorized (Nowell et al., 2017). Underpinned by a phenomenological framework that understands meaning and lived experience as occurring within a specific social and cultural context (Guest et al., 2012), deductively derived forms of thematic analysis are analyst-driven insofar as they provide less of a rich description of the overall dataset, but rather a detailed analysis of selected aspects of the data as informed by existing concepts or ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, the importance of a theme is determined by whether or not it captures something important in relation to the overall research purpose, as opposed to the frequency of its occurrence (as is more typical of inductive forms of thematic analysis) (Vausmoradi et al., 2013).

Our analysis of interviews was conducted in an iterative manner involving a sequential process of coding and subsequent identification and generation of themes. As with the development of the interview questions, our selection and refinement of themes was informed by the scholarship on social justice education. We also drew upon the literature on adult education in order to identify how faculty addressed the challenge of working with students who may have experienced a diverse range of situational, dispositional, and/or institutional barriers in their lives (Flynn et al., 2011). This literature was particularly useful in directing our analysis to faculty perceptions of attitudinal/ motivational shifts in students as they worked with them in building their academic skills. Results of the analysis were checked and discussed by members of the research team as themes were identified, developed, and refined.

In terms of the methodological limitations, readers should remain cognizant of the limited interview sample upon which the analysis and discussion are based. Despite this, our interviews yielded a wealth of data into the experiential facets of teaching. Furthermore, our decision to focus solely on instructors (rather than also include the voice of students) stems from our direct and specific focus on the understandings and teaching experiences of faculty. As much as we acknowledge students to be central to the teaching process, our focus is based on the recognition that faculty represents the face of the learning hub initiative and are, therefore, the first point of contact for many participating students with the post-secondary system (Lange et al., 2015).

We refer to faculty as “instructors” throughout the findings section, as this term prioritizes their teaching role. Furthermore, we refer to students as “marginalized,” a term which identifies them through their relationship to the post-secondary system rather than their personal characteristics per se (Riele, 2006). Such usage positions post-secondary institutions, rather than students themselves, as deficient or lacking with regard to the ability to encourage greater participation of low-income students.

## **Findings**

In this section, we begin by exploring instructors’ perspectives on teaching in light of their commitment to working with adult learners from low-income communities. In following sections, we examine how instructors negotiate their teaching practices in response to their perceptions of students’ needs, and how they work to create engaging and empowering classroom environments. We conclude by addressing instructors’ views on preparing students for future success at the post-secondary level.

### **Instructors’ Perspectives on Teaching Low-Income Adult Learners**

Throughout interviews, instructors reflected upon their approach to teaching in light of the barriers they perceived students to face, and typically referenced either situational (e.g., poverty, family or child care commitments) or individual (e.g., age or health-related) barriers as impediments to students’ learning. Instructors were cognizant of how these barriers manifested among students in classroom settings as a lack of confidence in their academic abilities and/or poor conceptualizations of themselves as students

(although several instructors were keen to stress that a lack of confidence exhibited by students does not necessarily mean that they lacked academic ability). As one instructor noted, “My teaching philosophy is that I try to engage students to find their own talents and overcome their own internal barriers” (Interview 8). The following instructor commented on how these barriers differentiated students from “regular” college students:

I had a higher proportion of students who were legitimately afraid of writing. It wasn't that they were unwilling, which is common, but that they were actually afraid of committing something to paper... I'm used to students who are nervous but I'm not used to students who are afraid. (Interview 10)

All faculty acknowledged the need to adjust and reflect upon the teaching strategies they employed in the classroom in response to the lack of confidence students had regarding their academic abilities. In particular, instructors were mindful of how their attempts to affect a dispositional shift in students' attitudes toward post-secondary education required them to maintain an empathetic and reflective awareness of students' social location and life circumstances. A number of instructors spoke to the awareness they had of how students were challenged by factors beyond their control (e.g., such systematic/structural barriers as poverty and precarious employment conditions in the form of temporary or part-time jobs with low wages) and how, to varying degrees, they identified with, if not internalized, the classificatory status of being adult learners from low-income communities. As one instructor noted:

The group that I had did identify...that they were part of a vulnerable population because of the stories that they shared. And they were okay with it, you know, because those were circumstances that they didn't necessarily have control over in their lives. I don't feel as though they viewed it as a negative thing for themselves. (Interview 7)

Another instructor spoke directly to what she described as being the “at-risk” status of her students and the extent to which she perceived them to share such a classification:

I think being “at-risk” is like being in a forest and you just see trees. You don't realize you're in a forest. You don't know where the boundaries of the forest are,

right, and so I think, oftentimes, when you're living in that reality, you might not label it as such until you're removed from it. (Interview 8)

Sensitive to how individuals from low-income backgrounds are often viewed as lacking the skills and capacities necessary for achieving success in post-secondary (with many having failed or dropped out of either high school or college), the following instructor stressed the importance of putting aside any preconceptions educators may hold regarding their abilities:

I would say to put away any preconceived notions. I think you have to learn from the students as much as they learn from you and follow their lead. Let them share. Let them participate. Let them be part of the class, but challenge them to do more than they think they can do because, often times, we don't think we're as strong as we actually are. (Interview 8)

Such views were common among instructors, who repeatedly emphasized the strength and resiliency of students, as well as stressing the importance of nurturing a participatory learning environment conducive to the sharing of experiences. Another instructor described using the following line of questioning as a way of encouraging students to change how they think of past disappointments and setbacks:

Have you ever noticed how small a rearview mirror is in your car as opposed to the windshield? Have you wondered why that is? It's because the rearview mirror is there to remind us of what's behind us, the screw-ups, the things people did to us. (Interview 2)

Acknowledging how the learning of students is integrally connected to their life circumstances and experiences, and of how they saw this as being manifested in negative internal messaging regarding their academic abilities (what Gorski, 2012, has referred to as the internalization of a "deficit ideology"), such views illustrate how instructors see part of the classroom challenge as balancing the commitment they had regarding course delivery while maintaining a sensitivity to the diversity of students' needs.

## **Instructors' Views on Students' Needs**

For all instructors, recognizing the anxieties and apprehensions students had, and working to alleviate them, was crucial to how the course progressed in its early days. Instructors were cognizant that students may likely have had a negative past experience of education at either the high school or post-secondary level. As such, creating engaging and non-threatening learning environments required instructors to demonstrate more flexibility than they were typically accustomed to, a willingness to “go with the flow” (as described by several instructors), and a readiness to tailor their approach to teaching in order to meet the needs of students. As one instructor commented:

I knew this was going to take a little bit more than what I knew...just the ability to be super, super flexible. Going to the first class, normally I'd go through all kinds of stuff, learning plans and course outlines, but there I was, okay, let's just go a little slower. So, I had to really adjust what I knew and really adapt it and that was a huge call on me. (Interview 3)

Commenting on the range of students' needs they encountered in the classroom, faculty highlighted the broad demographic composition of students (enrolled students ranged in age from 19 to 64) as well as a greater diversity of life experiences and circumstances of these students. The following instructor spoke of the diversity in her classroom as follows:

I had women who have kind of dwindled in and out of jobs, Tim Hortons here and there, and they're in their 40s, or late 40s, or early 50s, and they think, “Okay, is this all that life has to offer? There's got to be something better,” and they just need that boost. (Interview 2)

Such comments highlight the importance of contextualizing the post-secondary aspirations of participating students in terms of their life-course trajectories, as well as the importance of how faculty approached the responsibility of nurturing such aspirations. Seeking to build a relationship of trust, instructors were mindful of the importance of maintaining a respectful openness to what students potentially shared. As one instructor commented, “I want students to retain full agency in terms of what he or she [they] choose[s] to reveal to me” (Interview 11). Another instructor stressed the importance of:

...being open and honest and respectful of what they're sharing. Because everyone comes from such diverse backgrounds. Some people had started college (before) and dropped out. Some people have had teenage pregnancies, or lots of health issues. You name it, we've seen it. (Interview 4)

For instructors, a crucial factor in how they approached their teaching was the necessity of understanding how the diversity of students' backgrounds and experiences was intrinsically connected to their course experience. The following instructor noted:

There is a lot of diversity there, so you have to, you know...I coined the phrase, I don't know if I heard it somewhere, but the phrase I've been using ever since I started teaching here is that teaching is a learning experience. (Interview 5)

While the necessity of demonstrating flexibility when delivering course content to adult learners from low-income communities in order to encourage engagement is to be expected, such views position course delivery as a negotiated and "relational practice" (Riele, 2012, p. 71) between instructor and students. Beyond working to maintain friendly and flexible classroom environments, such negotiation also required what one instructor described as the challenge of learning how to wear "different hats" (Interview 2), in terms of pivoting from the role of instructor, to mentor, to counsellor, whilst also acknowledging the difficulties this posed in terms of maintaining the boundaries that typically exist between instructor and student.

### **Instructors' Views on Engaging Students with Course Content**

Once students settled into the class, instructors described the process of ensuring that students were challenged in terms of being provided with course content and forms of evaluation conducive to their learning and intellectual growth. On the one hand, instructors were aware that delivering course content at too high a level risked alienating the weakest students, and thereby possibly compounding the perceptions they had of themselves as lacking the academic skills necessary to succeed in a post-secondary environment. On the other hand, teaching at too low a level risked discouraging some of the stronger students, who may perceive of course content as being excessively simplified. As one instructor put it:

You know what? I'm going to be honest, that was one of the trickiest things from me because the spectrum of students that I had was so diverse... How do you offer a curriculum that's challenging as well as not threatening or defeating for the whole class? (Interview 4)

The importance of ensuring that students felt sufficiently challenged in the course, particularly in light of the hoped-for ripple effects of the initiative (such as when word of mouth spreads in the community as to its perceived benefits), was described by one instructor as follows:

They have an experience where they were challenged and they respect and appreciate that experience. They will go out and they will talk to other people and they'll be like, "Yeah man, that learning hub thing, it wasn't easy but, you know, I learned a lot." (Interview 8)

One way in which instructors sought to challenge students, and to prompt them to "do more than they think they can do" (Interview 8), was to encourage them to consider the transferability of what they learned to a personal or non-academic context. Commenting on the process of curriculum development, the following instructor noted:

We developed the curriculum knowing that some of the students we hoped would go to college, if that's where their interests lie, but we also had strategies for how does this work in life? How does this work in your home? How can we apply the same organizational strategies to employment? (Interview 6)

In posing such questions, instructors encouraged students to consider the applicability of their home/life experience to course content in order to nurture what Zyngier (2011) describes as a sense of ownership over course material. Similarly, Lalas and Valle (2007) suggest such encouragement helps students connect to the "funds of knowledge" (p. 77) they bring to the classroom in the form of tacit knowledge. As one instructor remarked, "I think some of them didn't realize that they already had prior knowledge that they could bring to the table" (Interview 3). As Lalas and Valle note, the provision of classroom opportunities that allows students to connect with and reflect upon their lived experience is crucial when seeking to implement a transformative shift in their thinking (pp. 95–97). Instructors commented on how encouraging students to establish such connections helped



not only concretize course content in their lived experience, but also helped demystify the nature of academic study. As noted by the following instructor:

Somewhere along the way you could see that people were getting the idea and they were starting to open up, and they were starting to come out of their shells and were starting to get creative. (Interview 5)

Such opening up was also viewed by several instructors as leading to a greater sense of community within the classroom. As described by one instructor:

I saw some amazing changes. Some students who at the beginning were unsure, quiet, reserved, to absolutely bonding with people, becoming probably friends for life, carpooling together, Facebook friends. So not only the social component but the academic component...to being, like, I can do this. (Interview 4)

## **Instructors' Views on Empowering Students**

The task of empowering students on their educational journey was of central importance for all instructors. A key way in which instructors worked to accomplish this was by encouraging students to assume co-ownership of the learning process. The view of course delivery as a co-learning opportunity was described by the following instructor as follows:

I'm part of the learning process as well, so we're kind of learning together... They're the teacher as much as I am. You know, although I'm there to reinforce concepts and everything else, it's their classroom too, and they're ultimately responsible for how the learning occurs. (Interview 7)

Such views echo Donaldson and Graham's (1999, p. 32) view of how adult learners develop relationships with their instructors that range from viewing them as subject-matter experts to viewing them as co-learners and peers. As one instructor commented, "I feel that I'm not there to teach, but that I learn from the students as well. I'm very much about the fact that we share information amongst each other" (Interview 11). Of significance here is the "pedagogical reciprocity" (Zyngier, 2011, p. 226) of the learning process that exists between instructor and student, a theme that resonates throughout the

interview narratives. The following instructor described the effects of the increasing sense of student ownership over the learning process as the course progressed:

I felt they certainly felt much more comfortable, much more relaxed, had a much better understanding of the process, had a much better understanding of their responsibilities in that process, and that they had some control over that process. I think there was a shift for many of them by the end that this is doable...of “I don’t know if I’m going to do it or not but I could do it if I wanted to.” (Interview 6)

Commenting on the increasing levels of student engagement and participation they witnessed in their classes as the course progressed, instructors noted that class participation increased week by week, even for initially shy or reserved students. Instructors perceived their students as developing “a better sense of self” (Interview 1), “a much better understanding of the process” (Interview 6), and the submission of assignments (what Calabrese et al. [2005] have characterized as “measurement in small victories” [p. 41]) as generating “a lot of ambition and a lot of excitement” (Interview 9) about the possibility of potentially pursuing a further course of post-secondary study. The challenge for instructors was to channel the motivation students had in a positive direction. For example, one instructor commented:

You have students who are motivated to learn and who obviously are interested in learning but don’t know what to take or what program will be best for them, or aren’t sure quite sure what their pathway will look like” (Interview 6).

Although instructors acknowledged that the purpose of the learning hub initiative was to encourage students on a post-secondary pathway, they were also mindful of their role in nurturing students’ appetite for learning more broadly. For example, one instructor stated that “my goal for them is to find their passion, bottom line. It’s always about finding your passion. So, if it’s work, or if it’s in school, let me help you get there” (Interview 4).

## **Instructors’ Views on Preparing Students for Post-Secondary Education**

Although all instructors saw their role as helping facilitate access to post-secondary resources and to encourage further post-secondary engagement, there was some disagreement among instructors regarding the extent to which the initiative mirrored a “regular”

college experience. Critically assessing the extent to which the program supports students on a further post-secondary pathway, one instructor remarked:

I think that you run the risk of setting people up for feeling that they will do well, and then the reality is they might not because they...I know that [the college] is amazing in terms of the supports that it has to offer, but I think there's a lot to be said about people who seek out those supports, as opposed to people who are hand-held all the way through. (Interview 8)

This instructor continued to suggest that the crucial issue is that there is “a little bit too much emphasis on the need that everyone has to succeed, that everyone should finish, that everyone should have a positive experience...but not everybody finishes and not everyone has a positive experience, and that's okay” (Interview 8). In light of this, a student's failure to complete a course, or have what the instructor describes as a “positive experience,” may have the opposite effect to what is intended, that of compounding an already negative association with the post-secondary system. That said, the same instructor stressed how the initiative provided students with an accessible opportunity to obtain a taste of the college experience:

You are setting people up for productive failure because the stakes are low. Emotionally the stakes might be a little bit higher, but you're giving them the ability to learn safely and without incurring too much further loss. (Interview 8)

Incorporating this dynamic of “productive failure” was seen by this instructor as a necessary aspect of course delivery, particularly in light of the importance that students be adequately set up for future success at the post-secondary level, as well as ensuring that students do not develop a false sense of confidence in their academic abilities.

Instructors also noted that many students did not have a solid understanding of what college/post-secondary attendance and participation looks like, and saw their faculty role as being to provide students with as realistic a picture as possible of the college experience. As one instructor commented, “My hope is that it would have added to their sense of ‘this is possible, this is plausible for me’” (Interview 5). To this end, instructors worked to ensure that students were knowledgeable of what they could expect while taking a full program of study in terms of larger class sizes, less contact with multiple faculty, and the challenges of juggling their personal and working lives. One instructor

(Interview 1) spoke of this process as building students' "toolbox of meaningful engagement" with the post-secondary experience. This "toolbox" included knowledge of the practicalities involved in having larger classes with multiple instructors, enhanced study and test-taking skills, and also awareness of the institutional supports available to them as they took their next step in the post-secondary system. Positioning their teaching practice explicitly within a social justice lens, the instructor commented:

I believe in challenging the social injustices in society and certainly what we know is that education facilitates change. Education is a way that people gain knowledge and are able to make informed decisions for their life, for their further education, for their employment. (Interview 1)

## Conclusions

Our analysis has highlighted the importance of the teaching practices that instructors employ in the classroom when seeking to engage low-income adult learners, and of the ongoing importance of reflecting upon such practices. Although post-secondary access initiatives help to address the situational and institutional barriers that individuals from low-income communities face, our findings have illustrated the crucial role that faculty play in shifting the dispositional/ attitudinal barriers, such as low self-esteem, a lack of confidence, and negative attitudes toward education, that can hamper student engagement with post-secondary education (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011). In doing so, our analysis has highlighted the central dynamic of teaching as a negotiated encounter between faculty and students, and the importance of designing and delivering courses from a social justice perspective in order to engage effectively with the distinctive needs of students. Faculty employ teaching practices that promote both student self-discovery (in terms of learning about the applicability of course content to their everyday lives) and empowerment (in terms of boosting the confidence students have of their ability to succeed in an academic setting). In this way, students are encouraged to take an active role in their learning and to establish points of connection and ownership between course content and their lived experience.

Although the generalizability of our findings is limited by the contextual specificity of the study, we suggest that the lessons learned have relevance for faculty elsewhere seeking to engage low-income adult learners with post-secondary education. Working closely with students in trusting, non-threatening learning environments helps them develop a new relationship to education. As Pollock (2012) states, “Without trust, no initiative, intervention, or effort at partnering to provide access and/or engagement, will come to fruition” (p. 10). That said, we are cognizant of the tension that exists between the priority that post-secondary institutions often place on capturing student success in the form of quantifiable measurements (e.g., enrollment and graduation rates), compared with less tangible indicators of student success, such as the increased levels of confidence and self-esteem that result from having a positive post-secondary experience. In light of this, we are mindful of a number of remaining challenges regarding the utilization of a social justice lens to strengthening post-secondary engagement for low-income learners.

A first challenge lies in connecting with students for whom engaging with a post-secondary pathway remains a challenging if not remote prospect. A limitation of the analysis we have presented in this article is that instructors are, for the most part, discussing their experiences of working with students who have successfully completed a course. In light of this, we suggest that teaching practices and course delivery need to be sensitized to the specificity of targeted populations, as well as to the demographic heterogeneity that exists within and between marginalized groups. Further research could explore instructors’ understandings and experiences of working with specific student demographics (e.g., immigrants, or Indigenous populations).

Second, we are cognizant that the employment of teaching practices informed by considerations of social justice and equity does not necessarily mean that students themselves engage in critical readings of the social, cultural, and economic composition of their communities (McInerney, 2009). Although Freirean conceptualizations of a social justice approach to education foreground the importance of fostering participants’ sense of critical consciousness in challenging oppressive and discriminatory practices, such an outcome can be difficult to achieve in classroom settings. This presents a challenge for instructors seeking to create democratic, empowering classroom environments that reflect a diversity of lived experiences and cultural identities.

Finally, we recognize that compassionate teaching practices are themselves unable to challenge the complexity of the socio-economic conditions that students from

marginalized communities face (McInerney, 2009; Shor & Freire, 1987) and are, therefore, limited in what they can achieve. In acknowledging that students face a dynamic interplay of individual and structural barriers, we recognize that the implementation of access initiatives seeking to improve post-secondary participation rates of marginalized groups through the incorporation of faculty-driven teaching practices rooted in a social justice framework can remain “dwarfed by the power of urban poverty” (Lalas & Valle, 2007, p. 76). In this, we remain mindful of Gale’s (2006) cautioning of not conflating the evidence that faculty can make a difference with faculty being *the* difference (p. 17). As such, we acknowledge the imperative of coupling a social justice approach to improving post-secondary access with the greater provision of wraparound support at the post-secondary level (i.e., primarily financial support in the form of bursaries and/or entrance scholarships), and acting in concert with poverty reduction strategies enacted at the municipal and provincial levels. Designed to engage and empower students on their post-secondary pathways, this approach has the potential to alleviate some of the barriers that students face while capitalizing upon the strengths of the faculty–student relationship that is central to the classroom experience.

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